

## **Cry, Boy, Cry** by [amsterdamhotelroom](#)

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** M/M

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Eleven | Jane Hopper, Karen Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Robin Buckley, Ted Wheeler, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven | Jane Hopper & Mike Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Mike Wheeler, Robin Buckley & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Will Byers & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2021-05-22

**Updated:** 2021-05-28

**Packaged:** 2022-03-31 20:36:00

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 2

**Words:** 7,304

**Publisher:** [archiveofourown.org](#)

**Summary:**

a Mike-centric fic taking place soon after the Byers left Hawkins. Perhaps The Smalltown Boy Plot ??? We'll just have to see (jk, you will have to see, I know because I wrote this)

# 1. Chrissy

## Author's Note:

I wrote this chapter a long time ago, but I do have a whole story attached (it's not complete though, so I might take ages to post the rest) anyways, I hope you enjoy

Before his friends, Mike had liked being alone.

There was a certain peacefulness that came with being all by himself— one that he never managed to feel again as he got older and became surrounded by other children, all of them yelling and shoving and calling each other names.

As a kid, he figured he would be alone forever. Perhaps this was because of his father, who, as far as he knew, had no life at all outside of work. Maybe it was his mother, who didn't seem to benefit from the gatherings she arranged with neighbors and the polite conversations she shared after church, or his sister, who had been friends with only Barbara Holland for most of her life.

Regardless of the reason, he spent most of his first five years in the basement, watching TV,— *Sesame Street*, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, *The Muppet Show*— playing with toys, or writing stories and reading them aloud to his inattentive father, who nodded occasionally to make it look like he was paying attention and then told him to go outside.

Of course, when he started school, things changed. He found it much more difficult to be by himself when he could see that everyone else was *together*, much harder to be quiet when everything was so *loud*. Girls sang in unison as they skipped rope, and boys wrestled and chased each other around in the mud. Swings creaked. Balls slammed against the pavement. It was all so much— *too much*— and for the first time in his life, he felt himself shift from simply “alone” to “lonely.”

He remembered trying not to cry. He remembered thinking, *I hate*

*this. I want to go home and never go anywhere again.*

And that was when he found Will.

Shy, cautious, *brilliant* Will, sitting on a swing and looking at the dandelions by his feet with a kind of gentle appreciation, holding a box of broken Crayola crayons and a notebook with his name written on it in childish capital letters.

Finding him was dumb luck. Mike had looked around for someone non-threatening— a boy, because he knew that boys weren't friends with girls— and approached the first kid he could find.

“Hi,” he said, “I’m Mike. It’s short for Michael. Do you want to be friends?”

Will said hi back, and then he said yes. He told Mike that his name was short for William. That was all there was to it, really.

They met Lucas later that year, and Dustin four years later.

As he got older, Mike grew out of any and all qualities shared between him and his father.

He knew that he would never be alone again.

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October 26, 1985

Hawkins, Indiana

“Turn that off, will you, Michael?” said Karen Wheeler with a flick of her wrist towards the TV, finishing off her third glass of wine.

“You’re closer to it.”

“Mike, I’m making dinner.”

“Really? It looks like you’re day drinking to me.”

“Mike.”

“Fine!” He set the comic he had been reading face-down on the coffee table and got up to push the power button, cutting off the news anchor in the middle of his sentence— “ *Yesterday, Mikhail Gorbachev announced...*”

“The news is just terrible these days,” his mother said into the refrigerator as she reached to get a head of cabbage.

“Uh huh.” Mike didn’t think there was ever a time when they talked about not-terrible things on the news.

“Who turned off the TV?” asked Mr. Wheeler, entering the living room, “I was watching that.”

“We weren’t watching it anymore, so we turned it off to save electricity.”

“Alright,” he mumbled, making his chair recline, “Turn it back on, will you son?”

Mike groaned, but stood again, this time slamming his comic on the table with a great deal of force.

Mrs. Wheeler’s lips tightened. “I really don’t want to hear about all the world’s problems right now.”

“It’s important to be informed, Karen.”

“Yes, well maybe you should start being informed about what’s going on under your roof...”

Mike took this as an opportunity to slip out of the room. He knew that it was best to leave before his parents started to argue, especially when his mom had been drinking. Otherwise, he’d get roped into the

conversation somehow and have to answer questions like, “What do you think Michael?” and, “Son, you agree with me, don’t you?”

Around thirty minutes later, he was called up to eat. Dinner was always quiet in the Wheeler household. He supposed the five of them didn’t have much to say to each other. Nancy ate carefully and politely, rarely looking up from her food and bouncing her leg rapidly under the table, while Holly tried to wipe spaghetti sauce from her chin and pushed the broccoli to the edge of her plate.

“Nancy, can you take Mike to school on Monday?” his mom said at last.

“I’m going in early to study.”

“That’s alright, take him early.”

Mike started to protest, but she interrupted him. “You need to work on your grades, Michael, we’ve talked about this.”

“My grades are fine!”

“Four failed assignments in a row isn’t *fine*, son,” Ted said through a mouthful of spaghetti.

Nancy pinched her lips together, looking back down at her plate with her eyebrows raised.

“Mike, you’re smarter than this,” Karen said, looking at him intently. He tried not to make eye contact. “Not to mention your *behavioral* issues...”

“What *behavioral* issues? That’s such bullshit!”

“Language.”

His mom ran a hand through her hair. “That,” she said. “Was a perfect example. Don’t talk back to me.”

Mike rolled his eyes as dramatically as possible and stood, his food untouched and cold on the table. He considered flipping his plate over, but that seemed a bit much, so he stormed out of the kitchen

without a word.

Putting his shoes on by the front door, he could hear his father attempt to break the silence. “These meatballs are good, Karen.” *Typical.*

“Thank you, Ted,” his mother said, because that was the sort of thing Mike’s parents said to each other to make it seem like everything was alright.

And everything *was* alright, in the way it had been forever— not happy, but functional. The only thing that Mrs. Wheeler, with her wine and romance novels and bright pink nails, and Mr. Wheeler, with his office job and monotone voice and loud snoring on the sofa, had in common was their children. Mike supposed Nancy, Holly, and himself were the only thing keeping them together. It wasn’t the type of life you dreamed of in childhood, but it was one you could learn to accept as an adult. It was comfortable, plain, conventional, exactly like his parents. Nancy had always hoped for something better. Maybe he had too, at a time. He didn’t exactly know what he wanted anymore.

He tried to open the door quietly, but Karen heard him anyway. “Where do you think you’re going?” She yelled, still seated at the kitchen table.

He ignored her.

Before she could say anything else, he slammed the door, grabbed his bike, and rode away.

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Since El and the Byers left Hawkins, Mike had been attending all sorts of social gatherings, sometimes with the rest of the party, but usually alone. He’d be lying if he said he enjoyed it all that much, but it was better than listening to Dustin and Lucas talk about their girlfriends or sitting in the basement thumbing through Will’s old

drawings again. He missed Will more than he cared to admit.

The two of them talked on the phone every week, but things weren't the way they used to be. The awkward gap that had formed between them that summer had only grown larger since the Byers moved away, and every day it became harder to hear Will's voice from the other side of it. Mike wasn't stupid. He knew the gap was his fault. He just had no idea how to close it. It was okay, though, He had plenty of time to think of a plan before Thanksgiving came around.

Things were different with El, too. He hadn't realized how little the two of them had actually talked to each other until talking was all they could do. But above that, he was worried for her. Worried that she wouldn't be able to handle a life with so many people around. She was going to school now, she told him, and even though she was with other kids who were behind for their age, none of her classmates could possibly understand what she'd been through. Hell, none of *Mike's* classmates could understand what *he'd* been through.

That was okay, though. He had long stopped trying to be understood. It was better that way, he thought. It only made him uncomfortable when people really *got* him. Maybe he was turning into his four year-old self all over again.

Tonight's party was only a few blocks away, at a white, three-story house belonging to a senior Mike knew from detention. She was alright, he supposed, except she never stopped singing, and her voice was the most annoying thing in the world. He wouldn't have been surprised if that was what landed her in detention in the first place. Dropping his bike in the front yard, he could already hear her wailing through the open front door. Her confidence was admirable, at least.

Standing in the doorway, Mike could see only two people he knew more than by name. The first was Eddie Munson, leader of the school D&D club, who waved at him like they were friends. Mike was pretty sure Eddie was the coolest guy he'd ever met. He wore spiky earrings and frayed denim vests and his hair was dark and sort of shaggy, like Mike's was when he didn't iron it straight. He nodded back in what he believed to be a very nonchalant, relaxed way, and to his delight, Eddie smiled.

The second was Troy. He stood in the center of the living room with a sort of ditzzy-looking blonde girl still wearing her cheerleading uniform from that afternoon's basketball game. They were both laughing, and Mike felt something boiling in the pit of his stomach. Since the time El made him piss himself in the gym, Troy had grown considerably less popular among their class. By ninth grade, he had fallen from grace almost completely, and seemed to think the way to get back up was to be even more of a douche than he had been before. For some reason, this seemed to be working, at least with the older kids who didn't know about the incident. Though Troy himself was as scrawny and unathletic as Mike, he was friends with a lot of upperclassmen— big, mean kids on the football team who always smelled like sweat and shoved you into a locker if you looked at them the wrong way in the halls. He would have gotten along with Billy, if Billy had been capable of getting along with anyone.

Remembering the physical damage guys like Billy could do, he decided it was probably best to avoid Troy altogether. He only made it to the next room before Eddie appeared at his shoulder.

“Hey, dude, where were you today?”

He froze. Eddie may have been cool, but he was also *terrifying*. “Sorry, man. Busy.” In Mike's recent dictionary, “busy” meant lying in bed and staring at the ceiling until it started to shift and swirl around, then going to Nancy's room and stealing from her piggy bank, but Eddie didn't need to know that.

“You, *and* Sinclair? You can't just leave Henderson alone like that.”

*Shit. Dustin.* “I'll be there next time. I swear.”

“You'd better be. This campaign can't wait, I'm serious.”

“Yeah, the campaign's cool. I really love the part abo-”

“Just be there, okay? And make sure you talk to Lucas, unless he's decided he's too good for D&D, with all his basketball and shit.”

“He hasn't! He'll be there too.”

“Good to hear. Have a great night, Wheeler,” he said with a grin,



already turning away and leaving Mike stunned in the hall.

There was no one left for him to talk to, but he couldn't stand the idea of getting home so early and seeing his parents, hearing about how he was *so much better than this* and *wasting his potential* and *really getting upset over nothing*. At that moment, he didn't want to go home ever again. But the house where he stood was so loud and full and messy and *lonely* that he didn't think he could stand to be there, either. He had to get outside.

He walked blindly to the kitchen, where he grabbed a half-empty pack of Oreos and, on impulse, an unlit cigarette that he found on the table by the door.

As he stepped into the night air, he was surprised by two things.

Number one: Though it was only October, big flakes of snow were drifting toward the ground, mixing with the dirt and turning into grey-brown slush.

Number two: He wasn't alone. The girl who had been talking to Troy—Chrissy, a sophomore that Mike knew only by name—stood against the side of the house, holding an entire bottle of wine and muttering obscenities under her breath.

He tried to turn away, partly because he didn't want her to notice him, and partly because it was freezing, but he didn't make it.

“Wheeler?”

“Oh, hey,” he said stupidly, pretending he had just noticed her for the first time. Now that she was facing him, he could see that there were streaks of mascara running down her cheeks. *Shit*. He didn't know what to say to girls most of the time, much less girls who were crying. *You can do this*, he thought, forcing himself to walk the rest of the way to where she stood, *You need to. It's what you're supposed to do*. If he were the protagonist in a movie, he would comfort the crying girl, and then, swooping in like some kind of hero, beat Troy up and come away from the fight looking all tough and courageous, like Han Solo or Batman or maybe El when she used her powers.

Since he was pretty weak and had never looked courageous in his life, he decided to stick with the first part of that scenario. “You okay?”

“Yep, I’m good,” she said, her voice so clear and stable it was like she had never cried at all. She smirked, noticing his cigarette. “God, where’d you get that?”

“Found it.”

“You shouldn’t smoke things you find just lying around. That’s how people get AIDS, you know.”

“Bullshit,” Mike muttered, wrinkling his nose. AIDS came from blood and sex. He saw it on the news.

She shrugged, pulling a purple lighter out of her pocket and handing it to him. “Don’t blame me when you die.”

She’d been drinking, he could tell. Lonnie Byers had acted exactly the same way when he and Will were children— all slurred, spat-out words and uneven steps. “What are you doing here?” he asked, a bit more aggressively than he intended.

“I don’t know. Came for fun.”

“I don’t mean the party, I mean outside.”

She paused to look down, moving the toe of her shoe around in the snow. “I like the cold.”

Mike tensed. It was stupid, really, but things like that got to him. He shivered, remembering Will’s hand like ice in his. *He likes it cold.*

“I’m guessing you don’t.”

“Huh?”

“You’re all... stiff. You seem frozen.”

“I’m fine,” he said, trying to adjust his posture to a looser, cooler one.

She raised an eyebrow. “Why are *you* out here?”

“Actually, I was looking for some quiet.” He looked directly at her, hoping she would get the message.

She didn’t. “I can be quiet,” she said, sliding her back down the wall until she reached the cold cement, which was still dry under the awning.

He snorted. *Yeah, right.* People like Chrissy never shut up. That was the reason Mike found them so annoying.

Surprisingly, though, she didn’t say a word. It was almost disconcerting, how silent she was. He felt self-conscious, lighting a cigarette in front of her,— he had never done it before, and he knew he had to look ridiculous— but she didn’t seem to be paying him any attention. It was as if she had just switched off.

“How do you do that?” he asked, attempting to inhale some smoke and promptly coughing his lungs out.

She looked up at him. If she thought he was an idiot, she didn’t show it. “...Do what?”

“Just, like, instantly go quiet.”

“Oh, I’m used to it, at home. My mom doesn’t like me to be loud.”

He thought about this. “It’s just- whenever I see you, you know, around, you’re always talking.”

She grinned widely, revealing the sizable gap between her front teeth. “Gotta get my energy out during the day. Plus...” she said with a giggle, “I’m pretty drunk right now. Try not to say too much when I’m drunk.”

Mike almost smiled and replied as if she were his friend, which made him want to punch himself. He sat down next to her and put the cigarette out in the snow slush.

“Didn’t like it?”

He shrugged, handing her lighter back.

“Not worth the lung cancer,” she said, twisting a strand of hair around her finger, “Weed is so much better.”

“Yeah,” Mike said, though he had never smoked weed in his life. Sometimes, after hearing horror stories on the news about meth addicts losing their minds or homeless people getting AIDS from needles, his dad would go off on tangents about that sort of thing, explaining that marijuana was how gangs and drug rings lured people in, and how you could smoke one joint and end up on the street addicted to God knows what before you knew it. Not that he thought Mike or Nancy would consider doing drugs at all. When Mike’s father started talking about something, he was speaking for no one but himself— which was good, because Mike hardly ever bothered to listen.

Chrissy raised an eyebrow, reaching to get an Oreo from the package in his lap. She ate them the way Dustin did, pulling the two cookies apart and licking the cream.

“So,” Mike said cautiously, remembering why he’d started talking to her in the first place, “Do you wanna talk about what happened, like, before you came outside?”

At first, she looked confused, until all at once her eyebrows shot into her bangs. “Oh! *That*. None of your business,” she said, finishing off her cookie and washing it down with a swig of wine, straight from the bottle.

“Okay, I was just asking because you didn’t look great- I mean, you looked good, just not, like, emotionally-”

“God, Mike, you’re nosy,” she said with a playful grin.

“What?”

“*Fine* . If you really want to know-”

“No, no! It’s cool. You don’t have to-”

She ignored him, leaping into a dramatic retelling of the night’s

events, which involved lots of yelling and alcohol and eventually some guy named Nathan “kind of ditching” her for Michelle Robinson after he said her hair would look better short, and she told him she wouldn’t cut it, which was okay, she supposed, because she could just go out with John H. or John S. next weekend. For Mike, the most shocking part of the story was that the whole thing had taken place over the course of fifteen minutes.

“He didn’t *kind of* ditch you. You can’t *kind of* ditch someone. He’s an asshole.” he said, because this sort of situation was so completely alien to him that he couldn’t think of anything else.

“Shut up,” she said. Mike had never heard someone use those words in such a gentle way before. “It really *is* none of your business.”

“I thought you were, like, dating Troy or something.”

“Ew, no. We’re just friends. Well, sometimes we’re friends. He’s kind of annoying.”

She reminded him of Eleven. Not the Eleven he found in the woods with Dustin and Lucas three years ago, scrawny and trembling and hardly able to speak, but Eleven now, with her romantic comedies and plaid shirts and scrunchies she traded with Max. She was a nice girl. And she was pretty, he supposed, in the soft, feminine way that dolls or elementary school teachers sometimes were. He didn’t know why she would ever spend time with Troy.

She tucked a frosted curl behind her ear and rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands. “It’s just so *hard* .”

“What?”

“You know, like, dating and relationships and that sort of stuff.”

“Oh.”

She looked up at him. “Ever had a girlfriend?”

“Yup. She broke up with me this summer, though.”

"You had an *actual* , real girlfriend?" she asked with a hiccup, "Not fake?"

"Yeah, what's so crazy about that?"

She stifled her laughter, trying not to smile. "Nothing. Nothing! It's not crazy at all. What was her name?"

"El."

She tilted her head, as if to say, *hm*. "...I don't know an El."

"She moved away. In September."

"I've lived here my whole life, and I don't know an El," she said skeptically, her face so serious Mike almost laughed.

"Whatever." He didn't really feel like talking about her.

They sat in silence for a while, leaning against the side of the house, until Chrissy's eyebrows knit together and she said, "You know, people used to say that you and *Will Byers* -"

*God*, he thought, *Here it comes*. He knew perfectly well what people used to say. "Whatever it is, it's not true." He didn't want to talk about Will either.

"I didn't think it was! That was like, years and *years* ago."

The air was suddenly colder around him. Had each streetlight along the road always been so bright? "I'm gonna go inside," he said, gripping the box of Oreos with all his might.

"What? Please don't go. I'm really sorry." She let out a mixture between a laugh and a sob, "I'm just so lonely." Snowflakes flecked her hair like confetti, and her whole face was red and blotchy. He didn't know if this was a result of the crying, or the cold, or the excessive amount of wine she'd had to drink. She looked like his mother.

*Fine. I'll stay*. He could hardly leave her out there on her own. "You don't have to apologize," He grumbled. He remembered saying that

very sentence to Will a thousand times.

“I shouldn’t have mentioned Will. I know you *really, really* miss him.”

“Seriously!”

She looked at him sadly, eyes out of focus. “I wish *I* had a best friend.”

“Can we talk about something else?” he snapped.

“Okayyy.” She bit her lip. “What do you wanna talk about?”

“I don’t know.” To be honest, this conversation was beginning to rub him the wrong way. He had no idea why he was still sitting beside her.

She giggled. “You know what I’ve always wondered?”

“What?”

“What’s up with your friend Maxine?”

“Max.”

“Huh?”

“She hates being called Maxine.”

“Oh, well, *Troy* always calls her-”

“Maybe you should stop listening to Troy.”

She ignored him. “It’s just- she’s kind of... weird, don’t you think?”

“What?” he said, squinting at her.

“Max is a *boy’s* name, silly...”

*Jesus Christ.*

“And all her friends are boys...”

“That’s not true!” Despite their constant bickering, he felt the need to defend Max. “She’s friends with El.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Come on,” she said with another giggle, “*Come on* . You don’t have to keep *lying* to me.”

He shook his head at her, incredulous.

“I know she’s not real, Mike.”

*I swear to god-*

“You just made her up so I wouldn’t make assumptions about the Will... stuff.” When he said nothing, she continued, “I get it, okay? I don’t *think* anything about you.” She leaned close to whisper the last part, even though no one could possibly hear.

“Can we *please* talk about something else?”

She gave him a funny look, but shrugged and said, “Sure. We could play truth or dare.”

“No way.”

Her mouth curled up at the corners. “Truth or dare?”

“Nope,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“I dare you to jump in the snow.”

“No! I’m already, like, so cold, and it’s all gross.”

“Come on!” She grabbed his shoulder and shook it. Even her laugh was like El’s, sudden and soft and at his expense. “You have to!”

“Or what?” he said, wrinkling his nose.

“Or you lose!”

“You can’t lose truth or dare.”

“Uh, yeah you can, because you’re literally doing it right now.” He noticed, somewhere in the back of his mind, that she was slowly



moving closer.

“I’m not losing, I’m refusing to play.”

“You miss one-hundred percent of the shots you don’t take.” Gentle laughter. Red cheeks. Billowing hair. Her hand was still on his shoulder.

“That’s such *bullshit* . I hate that saying.”

“You seem like the type of person who would.” She was dangerously close now.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She smiled, her eyes flickering briefly to his lips, which were dry and red in the cold. “Why are you so *angry* all the time?”

He could see every fleck of color in her eyes, every smooth, perfect inch of her skin. Her lips were stained with wine, and she smelled like fruit punch and alcohol. “I’m not *angry*, ” he said, “I just like things to make sense.”

“Not everything has to make *sense* ... Michael.”

Mike almost laughed. If she’d seen half of the things he had, she would be hoping for some sense, too.

He could have said a million things then, but he never had the chance, because at that moment, she leaned forward and kissed him.

And it was all wrong.

Her bubblegum lipstick was smudged on his mouth, and she was small and curved in all the wrong places, and her perfume made him want to gag, and he just *sat there*, like his last kiss with El, where he didn’t move or touch her and all he could focus on was the way her lips felt strange and cold and wonder why they had to touch his.

“What the hell?” He was shaking all over. *I’m having a heart attack*, he thought, *I am going to die*. Inside the house, some asshole was playing Queen at full volume. Beating heart. Sweaty palms. Spinning

thoughts and flashing lights. Freddie Mercury, singing, “ *I want to break free from your lies, you’re so self satisfied, I don’t need you.* ”

Chrissy's eyebrows knit together. She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

He batted her away. “What’s *wrong*? What’s wrong with *you*?” It was unfair to talk to her that way, he knew it, but something about the way she looked at him, like he was fragile, or pitiful, or needed to be handled with care, made his blood boil. He couldn’t believe that just moments ago, they had been talking congenially, almost effortlessly. He had no idea what to say to her now.

“I-”

“You what?” His panic was quickly turning to anger. “Just go make out with Troy, or something.”

Her eyes widened. She looked hurt now. Some cruel part of him thought, *Good. Let her cry.*

“I told you. I don’t like Troy,” she said.

“Oh, really? Because it sure seemed like you did before you decided to make a game out of talking to me!”

“I was starting to like you, actually-”

“Well I don’t like you! Because I know better, okay?” His whole life, he had avoided people like Chrissy— people who seemed to know who they were and what they wanted and thought they could do anything.

“Do you *really* ?” she said, her words mashed so close together they were nearly incomprehensible, “You’re no better than Troy. You think you’re *so much better* , but you’re not.”

“That’s such *bullshit* ! You’re so- ”

“I’m so *what* ?”

He said nothing. He didn’t know what she was. He only knew he

didn't like it.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she let out a sharp, hollow laugh. "You're a real piece of *shit* , Mike, you know that?"

He didn't answer, not even as she rubbed the tears out of her eyes, or realized he wasn't going to respond, or turned around and stumbled away, hands buried in the pockets of her corduroy jacket.

Her question was one he could only answer in his head.

*I know*, he thought, because he did.

He knew better than anyone.

## 2. Robin

### Notes for the Chapter:

i wrote some of this today and some of it in october,  
so i hope it's not too disjointed lol  
it's a bit shorter than the last one but i hope you  
enjoy!!

Mike was writing a story.

It started like this: Two people, a man and a woman, were the only survivors of a spaceship crash that left them alone on an alien planet. They needed to work together to survive, because it would be impossible for them to fend off man-eating creatures and build a shelter and hunt for food and find time to rest all on their own. The man had secrets (which are never disclosed to the reader) that he was certain would make the woman abandon him, leaving them both for dead, so he built an elaborate web of lies as a means of survival. He thought he had the woman fooled.

What he didn't know was that the woman had a secret of her own — as a child, she was part of an experiment which led to the development of supernatural abilities in humans, specifically telepathy. She could hear all of his thoughts, and she knew all of his secrets.

The story had the usual sci-fi stuff— laser guns, aliens, intergalactic travel— but at its core, it was about the relationship between the man and the woman. It wasn't a romance. That was stupid and girly and there was no time for kissing in space. The two characters didn't even like each other a lot of the time. They never would have been friends if they weren't in that very specific situation. But they made a good team, and they trusted each other, which was strange, because the woman knew she was being lied to the whole time, and eventually, they were friends, in an unusual sort of way.

It ended like this: When the man discovered what she knew, he was mortified and went off to try and survive on his own.

He died within a week, and the woman didn't make it much longer — all because the man couldn't stand the fact that she'd seen him the way he saw himself.

After his encounter with Chrissy, Mike felt like the man in his story. He felt like everyone *knew*. They knew that he cried more than his baby sister, and they knew that he couldn't smoke a cigarette, and that his parents didn't love each other, and that kissing Chrissy had honestly, truly felt like shit and he didn't know why, but he hoped he wasn't still in love with El or something.

He sent the rough draft of the story to the Byers' in the mail, and Will asked if he was doing okay. He shouldn't have done that. Now Will knew, too.

He thought all of this as he lay on a near stranger's bathroom floor, staring into the light on the ceiling as it flickered and fizzled out.

*It's not that*, he told himself, *it's not them*.

But what if it was? What if it was, and he got taken away like Barbara Holland and was never seen again until he was rotting and pale and dead?

*Better you than anyone else*, a small voice whispered from the back of his head. *Better you than Nancy, who's going to college, or Will, who's already been through so much, or-*

He sat up to take a sip from the cup he'd filled with the punch in the kitchen and flinched. There was definitely something in there that he shouldn't have been drinking. He tried to down the whole thing quickly but started coughing again halfway through, his throat burning and his mouth all bitter and dry. He was not cut out to be a rebel.

In fact, as he looked in the mirror, he realized he was everything but. His hair, now curly from the wet snow, hung awkwardly around his features in dark ringlets. Even worse was his face— bumpy nose, wide set eyes, oddly-shaped lips still smudged with Chrissy's pink lipstick. Frogface.

He poured the rest of his drink down the drain in a blood-colored splash and wiped his mouth on his sweater sleeve.

Someone was knocking on the bathroom door and yelling at him to hurry up. Another voice, more muffled, said, "Jesus, is somebody screwing in there?" He shoved past them before they could see who he was and didn't stop walking until he reached the front porch.

He thought that might be a good place to cry.

Instead, it was a good place to find Robin Buckley, sitting on the railing and swinging her legs back and forth as she stared out into the empty street. She wore a brown leather jacket covered in pins that said things like 'Ms.,' and '*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*,' and '*Hawkins High Marching Band '84*,' and her t-shirt had a picture of Robin from Batman on it, like some sort of joke regarding their shared name.

Standing before her in his sweater and suede sneakers, Mike felt infinitely uncool.

"Oh! Hi Wheeler. You startled me," she said with a laugh that stopped when she saw his face. "Hey, you okay?"

He shrugged. He had hardly spoken to Robin and didn't quite know what to think of her.

"Where are the other kids?"

He shrugged again.

"I'm alone too," she said. Her voice was gentle. "Steve's grounded for crashing his stupid car into a pole."

He bit his lip. The idea of Steve Harrington driving into a pole was almost enough to make him smile. "How can he get grounded? He's, like, nineteen."

"By acting like a child, that's how."

"Everyone loves him. Of course he's immature."

She shrugged. “Don’t make assumptions. There’s more to Dingus than meets the eye.”

“Whatever.” He picked at a fray on his sweater. He’d never been as close to Steve as his friends were.

“I’m serious! He has a lot of... emotional depth.”

Mike didn’t think any amount of “emotional depth” could make up for what Steve lacked in the mental department, but he said nothing. What did he care if Robin hung out with kids who flunked Algebra two years in a row?

“I think it’s kind of boring here, what about you?” She said, hopping to the ground. Though she was a senior and he was a freshman, they were about the same height.

“I guess.”

“Cool. Wanna get something to eat? Or I can take you home, whatever you want. You probably aren’t keen on biking through the snow.”

“I don’t want to go home.”

She nodded. “Okay then, food it is. I promise I’m a better driver than Steve.”

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Robin was a better driver than Steve. She was probably the best driver he knew, besides maybe parents, or people who drove taxis. Her car was kind of old— silver on the outside, worn leather seats on the inside, and though Mike didn’t know much about cars, it looked cool to him. When he asked her about it, she said it had been her dad’s before it was hers. Robin’s dad must have been a lot more interesting than Ted Wheeler, who drove a brown station wagon that smelled like dust and occasionally broke down in the middle of the road.

Sometimes, when Mike was much younger, still desperate for his father's attention, he would sit in the driveway and watch as Ted lifted the hood and mumbled to himself about the *damn engine*, (he never said damn in any other context) asking Mike to get him a wrench or a rag or sometimes just "that thing," leading to much confusion and overall boredom until Mike gave up and went inside. The Wheelers didn't do family bonding time.

"Wanna get Benny's?" Robin asked him as she waited for a red light— something Nancy often neglected to do.

"Sure." Mike didn't really want to get Benny's, because Benny himself had been murdered there after giving Mike's ex-girlfriend some fries. He supposed he could have explained this to Robin, as she was now in their weird, monster-hunting club, but talking about it sounded worse than just getting his shit together and eating there.

When they were comfortably seated at a booth in the back of the place, Robin with a chocolate shake and fries, Mike with only a cup of water, she took a deep breath and said, "So, why are you all wet?"

"The snow."

"What, were you making snow angels?"

He rolled his eyes.

"Okay, not that. So what was it then?"

"I was just standing outside for a while."

Raised eyebrows. Slight quirk of her mouth. She was curious, he could tell, but she didn't push him. "Okay."

Mike liked it a lot when people could tell that he didn't want to talk about something. He liked it even more when they didn't try to get him to talk about it anyway.

"Uh, how's high school?"

"It's alright," he said, though it wasn't. "I miss El. And Will. Will's Jonathan's brother. And El is—"



“Oh, I know who Will is. And I definitely know who El is. Remember,” she leaned in to whisper, “I was there when she moved a car with her *mind*.”

“That’s nothing. One time she flipped a bus over our heads.”

Robin nodded solemnly, as if to say, *very cool*. “Isn’t she your girlfriend?”

“Well, she was. We’re just friends for now, though. She lives, like, three hours away. El-” he paused. *What to say about El?* “Sometimes she can’t put things into words. You know, ‘cause of the lab and everything.”

“Huh.”

“Is Steve your boyfriend?”

She let out a bark of laughter so loud that the woman behind the register jolted awake in her seat. “Dingus? God, no. We’re just friends.”

Mike wasn’t convinced. Nancy and Jonathan had been “just friends” for a very long time.

“Seriously!” again, she cupped her hand to her mouth, leaning close to whisper, “Just between you and me, I think he’s still kinda hung up on your sister.”

“Gross.”

She combed her hair with her fingers, laughing softly in the way adults did whenever a kid said something unintentionally funny. “Steve is actually really cool. He’s one of my favorite people.” She shifted her gaze to Mike, suddenly serious, “Don’t you dare tell him I said that.”

“I won’t.” In all honesty, Steve Harrington terrified him. Of course he had been a douchebag while he was dating Nancy, but Mike’s resentment was also deeper— more painful and personal. He knew that Steve, with his hair and his sports and his spiky baseball bat, was more of a man than he would ever be. He’d probably kissed so many

girls that he was used to the feeling.

With that thought, he felt a question pop into his mind. "Hey, Robin?"

"Yeah?"

"What's-" He chewed the inside of his cheek. "This sounds stupid, but, like, when you kiss someone, what's it supposed to feel like?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Why not?"

"I haven't kissed anyone."

"Oh." This seemed strange for a girl like Robin, who wore such cool clothes and makeup and had nice teeth and shiny hair.

"Well, I kissed a boy on the cheek in sixth grade," she said with an amused smile, "But I guess that doesn't count, does it?"

He supposed not. "What does Steve say it's like?"

"I tend not to pay attention during tales of Dingus's sexual exploits, unless I *feel* like being scarred for life." She grinned again. Robin seemed to find herself very funny. "But, I would assume, if you like whoever you're kissing, it's fun. You probably get, like, butterflies in your stomach and all that."

"Hm." Mike didn't find any of this to be particularly helpful.

"Why are you asking? From what Dustin told me, all you did this summer was kiss El."

He shot up in his seat. "Dustin talks to you about me?"

"Yeah. Not to brag, but he basically tells me everything about his life. Well, he tells Steve everything. I get about... seventy percent."

"That's complete bullshit! What does he say about me?"

"Sorry, Michael, I can't tell you. That would be betraying Dustin's

trust, which I worked *so very hard* to earn.”

“You’ve done that already. You just told me something.”

“Touché, child friend, touché.” She took a fry and dipped it in her milkshake. “He says you’ve been ignoring him for several months, you’re whiny, grumpy... What else? Just a sec, I’m thinking.” She took her time getting another fry. “He definitely thinks you’re avoiding everyone, and he thinks you can’t get over El-”

“Not true! I kissed a girl tonight.” When she raised an eyebrow, he added, “With tongue, and stuff.”

“Wow.” She nodded, eyes wide. “Do you want a medal?”

“Shut up.”

“No, no, it actually makes a lot of sense.” She smirked. “I was wondering where the lipstick came from. Thought maybe you’d just applied it really badly.”

“What?” Surely he’d gotten the last of that off in the bathroom. Self-consciously, he wiped his mouth with a napkin, and it came away pink. Chrissy kissed *hard*. “I wasn’t weari-”

She held up her hands. “No need to get defensive, Michael. I don’t judge.”

He slumped deeper into his chair, trying his best not to smile. It was weird. When Robin laughed, he never felt embarrassed, even if he was the subject of her amusement. No matter how much she teased him, it didn’t feel mean.

In the warm light of the diner, he noticed she had freckles all over her face. Mike hated his own freckles. They made him look wrong, almost alien, he thought, like some sort of creature that was neither real, nor human. But seeing Robin’s made him reconsider. They suited her well, and made her almost more beautiful, in that tough, messy way that she was.

He would never let her know he thought this, but Robin was cool. She was unlike anyone he’d ever met. And he wanted to be like her,

though he couldn't explain why.

"I actually—" He looked out the window at the lights, the stars, the glowing plastic jack-o-lantern across the street, and suddenly felt brave. Maybe it was the night, or the empty restaurant, or the fact that something about Robin, behind her dark eyeshadow and sarcastic grins, was so incredibly kind, but he felt like he could tell her anything. She didn't judge other people. She couldn't. She was friends with Steve, for God's sake. He considered, for only a second, telling Robin how he felt. Mike hadn't been honest with anyone in a long, long time.

But the truth was a terrible thing— something that lived inside him and only him and had to be knocked back down each time it crawled to the surface. And this truth hardly mattered. Maybe that was the way kissing was supposed to be— just movement, something you had to get over with and nothing more.

He took a deep breath. "I need to go home now," he said, "Already past curfew." No matter how kind she was or how easy it was to talk to her, Robin wasn't his friend. He could lie to her all he wanted.

He just hoped she couldn't read minds.